

# Concord-Alewife Planning Study

## Meeting Notes: May 29, 2003 Committee Meeting

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**Committee Members Present:** Joseph Barrell, Doug Brugge, Peg Callahan, Pat Goddard, Mitch Goldstein, Hom Sack, Ann Tennis, Peter White

**City of Cambridge Staff:** Susan Glazer, Stuart Dash, Iram Farooq, Owen O'Riordan, Susanne Rasmussen

**Consultants:** David Black, David Dixon, Ron Mallis, Liz Langley

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### Welcome & Introductions

The committee bus tour, on May 17<sup>th</sup>, was a good opportunity to learn about the Study Area and to discuss Study Area issues.

Next public workshop is scheduled for Saturday, June 7<sup>th</sup>, 9:30 to 12:30 at the Tobin School.

### Presentation on Transportation

Transportation concerns that had been brought up by the Committee and public to date:

- Congestion
- Cut-through traffic, e.g. on Blanchard Road
- High traffic speeds at off-peak hours
- Truck traffic, particularly on Blanchard Road
- Pedestrian and bicycle safety, which is a concern area-wide particularly along Concord Avenue
- Barriers

### Committee discussion:

- *Barriers:* Some barriers are desirable, while others are not. At this point, this distinction has not been made, although at some point, that will be necessary.
- *Should the congestion that is causing cut-through traffic on Blanchard Road be addressed?* It is unclear whether increasing capacity at bottlenecks would improve the situation or induce more traffic.
- *Is Blanchard Road really a local road or part of the regional network that would understandably have higher volumes of traffic?* While it may be difficult to influence the amount of traffic on Blanchard Road, there is a concern about the speed of traffic that could be addressed through the study.

### Analysis of existing data:

- *Average Weekday Daily Traffic (AWDT)* - Traffic counts, which indicate the number of cars traveling over a certain point in either direction, give a good sense of magnitude of the traffic on the roadways in the study area. Traffic counts do not indicate turning numbers. Twenty percent of trips traveling through the study area have a destination within the study area, including those to the MBTA parking garage, that an additional 14% of trips has other Cambridge destinations, and 2/3 of trips represent regional traffic.
- *Level of Service (LOS)* - LOS ratings indicate how well or poorly intersections work based on the delay that cars must wait to get through an intersection. For example, the rating of D – which is considered to mean one cycle required to get through an intersection area – is considered to be an “urban standard” and would be more applicable to the study area than to a more suburban location. This snapshot of intersection operations confirms things that have been discussed, in particular the amount of traffic and congestion on the parkways. In developing solutions, it is essential to think about safety rather than simply trying to solve congestion at the intersections.

- *Pedestrian & bicycle infrastructure* – There are various bike paths in the area as well as improvements that came with the Fresh Pond Parkway Enhancement Project, and a number of signalized pedestrian crossings and signalized intersections within the study area.

#### “Transportation Toolbox”

- *Influencing trip generation* – Different land uses produce different amounts of vehicle trips (eg., for the same amount of development, light industrial will produce fewer vehicle trips than R&D and office, and R&D will have fewer trips than office.
- *Enhancing other modes* – By providing missing pedestrian/bicycle connections, providing safe crossing and pedestrian walkways that are attractive, creating better bus shelters and better sidewalks, improving transit service and access to that service, and controlling the amount of free parking.
- *Changing the mode split* – Getting people out of their single occupancy vehicles to use other modes of transportation.
- *Managing the parking supply* – Parking at one’s place of work has a significant effect on people’s choice of commute. Because of differences in commercial and residential parking needs it will be important to establish different parking ratios for commercial and residential uses.
- *Balancing the transportation environment* – The transportation environment encompasses a large variety of users, and the objective should not be focused entirely on moving cars through, but on increasing the viability of all transportation options.
- *Looking at traffic calming options* – Consultants and the City have been exploring opportunities to calm traffic on Blanchard Road and feel that there are some real options. Physical and visual approaches could be taken, in particular the possibility of addressing the vast amount of blacktop at the intersection of Blanchard Road and Colby Street, in a manner similar to that which was done at Sheridan Square on Rindge Avenue. An intervention such as this could effectively retain roadway space while reclaiming some surfaces for pedestrian benefit and raising driver awareness. During the discussion a question was raised about the possibility of combining a speed bump with a pedestrian crossing. In response it was stated that there are a number of possibilities, including raised crosswalks or table tops (raised intersections). However, these vertical devices can at times be tricky because they do not have universal application, and can increase noise generated from truck traffic. An intervention along Blanchard Road would require working with the Town of Belmont to create a solution. Belmont might be increasingly interested in exploring traffic calming opportunities.

#### Next steps for analysis

Additional data is currently being gathered to help supplement what is available to date. A traffic model would be developed to help analyze the traffic impacts of the various land use scenarios that are beginning to emerge. The model will help determine the feasibility for making connections, and fleshing out what the opportunities for connections really mean. Three principles are beginning to emerge as guiding transportation principles for development in the study area:

- *Reduce the anticipated trip growth compared to current zoning.*
- *Reduce auto mode share by improving access to transit and designing for a walkable, bike-friendly community.*
- *Address safety issues.*

### **Discussion Summary:**

A Committee member asked whether there would be significant **improvement on Blanchard Road**, given that 20% of the traffic passing through the area has destinations within the study area. There was concern, that even though more options and a balanced environment are an important principles, the impact of such initiatives would not significantly **improve the current situation**.

A direct **connection between the Triangle and Quadrangle** areas was mentioned as a way to take cars off of Blanchard Road. In response, it was noted that while a connection would be significant for improved vehicular access, it also has the potential to become a short cut for regional traffic. Making a direct connection between the Triangle and the Quadrangle wouldn't necessarily take cars off of Blanchard Road, but would simply create more capacity and more traffic in the end.

A committee member had concerns with one of the emerging guiding principles for transportation, specifically, that rezoning might have a negative **impact on property owners**. One of the consultants countered that higher value stems considerably from the area's walkability and access to transit. Limiting new trip generation is worthwhile only to the extent that value is created.

Someone asked whether the level of congestion on Alewife Brook Parkway would be a disincentive to **development in the Quadrangle**. It was explained that development would likely happen regardless of incentives or disincentives given that today there are few areas left in the city for new development.

One committee member was concerned that the loss of a travel lane on **Concord Avenue** for bicycle lanes contributed to traffic problems on the street. In response, there was little traffic data on Concord Avenue before the bike lanes, the City is investigating present performance, and also at possible signal improvements at the intersection with Blanchard Road. There may actually be only a perceived problem at the intersection, which will have to be determined. Bicyclists have multiple destinations like drivers, and that bike lanes need to be in the best location to allow cyclists to cross streets easily.

Another committee member felt that two assumptions were evident based on the presentation: addressing regional traffic is beyond the scope of this work, and the quadrangle will be developed someday in the future. Based on these assumptions the key question becomes what **type of development** should happen so that both residents and landowners will benefit. Also, what kind of **timeframe** is expected to see some of the changes implemented? One of the consultants answered that we might begin to see changes here within two market cycles, and referred to development that is starting to happen in North Point. However, things are slightly more complex in this situation due to the multiplicity of landowners.

A question was asked whether any data existed that would indicate how the arrival of the Alewife MBTA station affected traffic for development on Cambridgepark Drive. There was also interest expressed in the prospects for a vehicular with pedestrian and bicycle connection between the Quadrangle and the Triangle, particularly if the road essentially dead-ended in the Quadrangle.

There was skepticism expressed from a member of the committee about the **prospects for development**, who felt that the traffic situation today might act as a deterrent to new development, and was interested in continuing to see the links between development and **benefits to the community**, as might be the case with traffic calming. In addition to LOS and traffic counts, it was felt that it would be beneficial to see data about traffic safety, namely police accident reports.

A committee member spoke about the importance of having no preconceived notions of future land uses in the study area, and expressed concern about the outcome of the process around Trolley Square.

The members of the committee were reminded that the nature of the committee's role was advisory, with recommendations for zoning to be submitted through the City Manager to the Planning Board

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and the City Council. Either of these bodies may choose to modify the recommendations slightly, but that they give great credence to the committee findings.

**Next Steps and Administration:**

At the public meeting on June 7<sup>th</sup>, there will be a presentation of what has been accomplished up until now, including the two general approaches. The primary objective of the meeting is for the public to create three dimensional models; moving building blocks around to see what kinds of uses, and how much of them, should go where in the study area. Similar to the previous public meeting, committee members will be asked to help facilitate the break-out groups.

**Public Comment:**

At the end of the committee discussion there was an opportunity for the general public in attendance to comment. Comments are summarized below:

Economic downtime was noted as a time that things are able to be reassessed. However, changes are not going to happen overnight and it is important to recognize the steps along the way. Someone said that the committee was in a powerful position and that a great deal can be planned through zoning. One person stated that it might be more important to have a livable city than a bond rating. Fresh Pond was noted as an important amenity, which is not just a place to play golf. There was also concern expressed about the ability to house any new workers to the area given the fact that compared to national levels, the number of housing units per job in Cambridge is very low.

Another meeting attendee expressed the desire to help the committee in its work, especially regarding flooding studies of the area. The Survey of Reports and Data on Rainfall and Flooding for the Alewife Brook Area of Arlington, Belmont, and Cambridge was also mentioned as being available through the Community Development Department.

One person noticed a significant increase in the number of cars outside their home, even within the last year, and wondered at what point the system collapses. It was noted that new development might generate 15,000 new vehicle trips, which the study area may not be able to deal with. There was a question regarding traffic data for Alewife Brook Parkway and Massachusetts Avenue. A meeting attendee believed that Level of Service (LOS) ratings have an impact on traffic safety and explained that the longer the delay, the more likely drivers will speed through intersections and begin using, sometimes illegal, alternate cut-through routes. There was concern about safety and the behavior of drivers when the traffic levels build up. Someone pointed out that traffic can have a lower LOS rating than F. One person mentioned that the group should look at uses other than development in the area.

**Conclusion:**

Residential uses can be very valuable to landowners especially in the present context because it has such high value. Additional housing helps address the need for affordable units and does more to support commercial uses. It is also important to realize that 100% of any one thing won't be feasible. The plan should be explored from a number of perspectives. For this process to result in a successful plan, it is important for everyone on the committee to keep asking the questions. The consultants will make an effort to respond to the questions within the plan.